The Roads Were Already There

Modern Ukraine and UPA Extremism

Abstract

This paper argues that the extremist history attached to OUN-B and the UPA cannot be confined to a brief wartime episode. OUN-B emerged in 1940 from an Organization of Ukrainian Nationalists that had already embraced political violence; the U.S. National Archives' congressionally mandated history describes the Bandera faction itself as a "militant fascist organization." After 1945, the Foreign Section of OUN-B preserved an authoritarian political program, used intimidation and terror against rival emigres, maintained a security service with personnel in the United States, and remained a durable transnational organization. At the same time, a rival line created by former OUN-B leaders - the Foreign Representation of the Supreme Ukrainian Liberation Council - entered a decades-long relationship with U.S. intelligence, centered in part in New York, where Mykola Lebed and the CIA-backed Prolog operation helped shape the postwar information environment. The paper then traces the return of the Bandera organizational lineage to independent Ukraine, its incorporation into state memory after 2014, and the normalization of associated symbols in contemporary civic life. The 1940s were neither the beginning nor the end.

Note on Jurisdiction

This paper is written and published in the United States by an American citizen. Portions of it could not lawfully be published in the same terms by a Ukrainian media outlet or public official.

Bill No. 2538-1 was enacted as Ukrainian Law No. 314-VIII, "On the Legal Status and Honoring the Memory of Fighters for Ukraine's Independence in the Twentieth Century," adopted on 9 April 2015. Article 6 makes public denial of the legitimacy of the twentieth-century struggle for Ukrainian independence unlawful. The organizations covered by the law include the Organization of Ukrainian Nationalists and the Ukrainian Insurgent Army.

The practical reach of the prohibition has been narrower than its text, but its professional effect is real. Historians, editors, public officials, and media institutions inside Ukraine confront incentives that do not apply to an author publishing the same argument in the United States. Much of the sustained critical scholarship on the OUN and UPA has therefore been produced outside Ukraine, which in turn makes it easier to describe the criticism as foreign.

The asymmetry is the point. It costs the author nothing to state this history plainly. A Ukrainian colleague can pay for the same argument with professional standing, institutional access, or a career.

1. What Is Actually Being Claimed

The paper makes five connected claims. The first is historical and organizational; the later claims concern the political inheritance of that history.

1. OUN-B did not appear from nowhere in 1940. It was the radical Bandera faction of an OUN movement founded in 1929 that had already used political assassination as a method.
2. The destruction of the armed UPA did not end OUN-B. Its Foreign Section survived abroad, preserved a disciplined authoritarian structure, and continued coercive activity inside the emigre world.
3. The United States did not merely encounter this network after the war. U.S. intelligence documented it, protected and exploited parts of it, and knowingly tolerated an OUN-B security-service presence in the United States because the network was considered potentially useful against the Soviet Union.
4. The OUN-B political lineage returned to independent Ukraine after 1991, and after 2014 the Ukrainian state adopted major elements of the OUN-UPA legacy into official memory policy.
5. The result is not far-right electoral control of Ukraine. It is something different: a historically extremist tradition whose organizations, personnel, symbols, and narratives survived long enough to become separable from fringe electoral politics and available for mainstream civic use.

2. The 1940s Were Not the Beginning

The easiest way to minimize OUN-B is to begin the story in 1941, treat the German invasion as a temporary radicalizing environment, and allow the movement's extremism to recede with the war. The chronology does not permit that.

The Organization of Ukrainian Nationalists was founded in 1929 among western Ukrainians in East Galicia. The National Archives' history of U.S. intelligence and the OUN records that the organization called for an independent and ethnically homogeneous Ukraine and that it assassinated Polish Interior Minister Bronislaw Pieracki in 1934. Stepan Bandera and Mykola Lebed were among those convicted and sentenced for the murder. They escaped imprisonment after the German invasion of Poland in 1939.

The Bandera split of 1940 was therefore not the birth of political violence in the movement. It was a factional reorganization inside an organization already accustomed to conspiratorial discipline, assassination, and revolutionary nationalism. In the language of the National Archives' 2010 report, the Bandera wing was a "militant fascist organization" seeking Ukrainian independence immediately.

That point matters because it changes the periodization. The question is not why a previously ordinary nationalist movement suddenly became extreme under Nazi occupation. The extreme repertoire preceded the occupation and was carried into the war by people who had already practiced it.

3. The Wartime Record

Lviv, 1941

OUN-B worked with German military intelligence before Operation Barbarossa. Members of the movement served in the Nachtigall and Roland battalions, and OUN-B activists entered Lviv with German forces in June 1941. Yaroslav Stetsko proclaimed a Ukrainian state there on 30 June in Bandera's name and pledged cooperation with National Socialist Germany.

The Lviv pogroms that followed killed thousands of Jews. The strongest recent scholarship disputes older casualty totals at the margins, but it does not erase OUN-B participation in anti-Jewish incitement, militia activity, and violence. The U.S. Holocaust Memorial Museum identifies Judeo-Bolshevik antisemitism as an important element of OUN-B propaganda and documents the participation of Ukrainian nationalist activists in the violence.

Volhynia and Eastern Galicia, 1943-1945

UPA units carried out a systematic campaign of ethnic cleansing against the Polish population of Volhynia and Eastern Galicia. Polish estimates commonly place Polish civilian deaths at roughly 100,000; Ukrainian civilian deaths in reprisals and counter-actions are commonly estimated at roughly 10,000 to 15,000. In 2016 the Polish Sejm designated the massacres a genocide.

The armed history is therefore not a matter of symbolic association alone. It includes organized mass violence against civilian populations. The later political problem arises because the institutions that preserved and rehabilitated the movement's memory inherited that record rather than beginning after it.

4. The 1940s Were Not the End

The armed insurgency inside Soviet Ukraine was eventually destroyed. Roman Shukhevych was killed in 1950, Vasyl Kuk was captured in 1954, and the remaining underground was broken by the end of the decade. That fact does not end the organizational history.

A dictatorship in exile

Bandera created the Foreign Section of the OUN (ZCh OUN) in February 1946. According to U.S. Army Counterintelligence Corps reporting summarized by the National Archives, Bandera intended to build a dictatorship in exile and transfer it to a future independent Ukraine. The same reporting described the organization as using intimidation and terror against political enemies and characterized Bandera as "extremely dangerous" because of his willingness to use violence against Ukrainian rivals.

The point is chronological. The war was over. Nazi Germany had been defeated. Yet the coercive political method did not simply evaporate. In 1948, after a split with the Hrinioch-Lebed group, Bandera still controlled an estimated 80 percent of the party, claimed authority over the Ukrainian national movement at home and abroad, and continued terror tactics against anti-Banderist leaders in Western Europe.

The security service reaches the United States

A CIA memorandum dated 23 May 1951, "Vasyl Gogosha and the OUN/Bandera," makes the American extension explicit. It stated that there were "at least twenty former or active members" of the OUN-B security service (SB) in the United States. The memo acknowledged the SB's use of extra-legal methods and explained that American officials in Germany had made no serious effort to disband it because its files, investigative capacity, and wartime potential could be useful to the United States.

This is not evidence of a network that Washington had simply lost track of. It is evidence that American intelligence knew the network existed, understood something of its coercive methods, and made an affirmative Cold War calculation not to destroy it.

A durable emigre organization

The organization remained legible to U.S. intelligence decades later. A CIA survey of major Ukrainian emigre organizations dated 11 November 1977 still treated OUN-B as an active transnational structure, identified its affiliated Organization for the Defense of Four Freedoms of Ukraine in the United States, and described OUN-B as the originator and a decisive force in the Anti-Bolshevik Bloc of Nations. The 1940s were no longer recent history. The organization was still there.

5. The American Bridge: New York, Prolog, and Protection

The postwar American story has to be divided carefully. The Hrinioch-Lebed group broke with Bandera in 1948 and became a rival to his Foreign Section. It should not be mislabeled as post-1948 OUN-B. But its leaders were wartime OUN-B officials, and the history of their protection in the United States is part of the afterlife of the same wartime movement.

Lebed in New York

Mykola Lebed had been Bandera's wartime chief in Ukraine and a senior figure in the UPA/UHVR milieu. U.S. records already contained grave allegations about his wartime conduct. Nevertheless, CIA operations with the Hrinioch-Lebed group began in 1948, and Lebed was moved to New York, where he obtained permanent residence and later citizenship. The National Archives records that other Ukrainians in New York identified him as responsible for wholesale killings of Ukrainians, Poles, and Jews.

Beginning in 1953, the CIA operation AERODYNAMIC worked through a New York study and publishing organization under Lebed. It was incorporated in 1956 as Prolog Research and Publishing Association and later reorganized as a for-profit corporation to obscure the funding stream. CIA files identify the Supreme Ukrainian Liberation Council's foreign-affairs secretariat and Prolog at 875 West End Avenue in Manhattan. A 1977 CIA record described Prolog at that address as an Agency proprietary.

The organization produced newspapers, books, bulletins, radio programming, and other Ukrainian nationalist material for distribution into Soviet Ukraine. The significance is not that every publication was a falsification. It is that a U.S. intelligence service was financing one institutional channel through which the postwar story of the Ukrainian nationalist movement was being written and distributed.

The history is rewritten before it is investigated

The archival sequence is especially important. Before the CIA relationship matured, Lebed had already produced a 126-page history that, in the National Archives' words, sanitized his own wartime record and that of the Bandera group and UPA by emphasizing their struggle against Germany and the Soviet Union. The later information operation therefore did not begin with a neutral historical slate.

The Justice Department arrives

In 1985, the Justice Department's Office of Special Investigations opened an investigation into Lebed. The National Archives records that the CIA feared scrutiny would compromise QRPLUMB, the later name for the operation, and would provoke the Ukrainian emigre community. The Agency shielded Lebed by denying a Nazi connection and presenting him as a Ukrainian freedom fighter. As late as 1991, the CIA tried to dissuade OSI from seeking German, Polish, and Soviet wartime records concerning the OUN.

The geography closes the loop. Lebed was living in Yonkers. The Village Voice investigated him in New York and published "To Catch a Nazi" in February 1986. The CIA had already circulated an internal memorandum about the paper's approach to Lebed in January. Today the CIA Reading Room preserves both that internal memorandum and the newspaper investigation itself. The institution that helped protect the network also preserved the record of the attempt to expose it.

6. Return to Independent Ukraine

Bandera was assassinated by the KGB in Munich in 1959, but his faction did not disappear. The National Archives notes explicitly that the faction continued to exist after his death. Leadership passed through the emigre structure to Yaroslav Stetsko and, after his death in 1986, to Slava Stetsko.

Slava Stetsko returned to Ukraine in 1991. The Congress of Ukrainian Nationalists was founded in 1992 as the OUN-B's domestic political vehicle, retained the red-and-black banner, and carried the organizational lineage into the new state. Stetsko was elected to the Verkhovna Rada and, as the eldest deputy, opened parliamentary sessions in 1998 and 2002.

That is the continuity claim stripped of metaphor. The armed UPA did not survive. The political organization did. It crossed the Cold War through emigre institutions and returned when the Soviet state disappeared.

7. From Historical Movement to State Memory

After 2014, the Ukrainian Institute of National Remembrance became a central instrument for recoding that inheritance. Volodymyr Viatrovych, who had previously directed the archives of the Security Service of Ukraine, led the Institute from March 2014 to September 2019 and was closely associated with the 2015 memory-law package.

Scholars including Grzegorz Rossolinski-Liebe, John-Paul Himka, Per Anders Rudling, David Marples, Andrii Portnov, and Tarik Cyril Amar have criticized this school of memory politics for minimizing or reframing OUN-B and UPA responsibility in the Lviv pogroms, Volhynia, and related episodes. Roughly seventy scholars opposed the 2015 laws in an open letter warning against legislating historical legitimacy.

The result was not the electoral triumph of OUN-B. It was more consequential in another way: the state itself became a carrier of the rehabilitated historical narrative. A movement did not need to win a parliamentary majority if important parts of its memory had already been nationalized.

8. The 2014 Bargain

The volunteer formations of 2014 were not created out of nothing by the state. They drew on organized ultranationalist milieus from the 1990s and 2000s, including UNA-UNSO, Patriot of Ukraine, and the Social-National Assembly. Azov emerged from that environment and Maidan self-defense networks in May 2014; other volunteer formations included Aidar, Dnipro-1, and Right Sector's Volunteer Corps.

The decisive state action was incorporation. Ukraine's regular armed forces were badly degraded, and the government accepted formations that were already organized and capable of fighting. Azov entered the National Guard in November 2014.

- A formation whose founding milieu included explicit neo-Nazi and ultranationalist currents acquired a durable foothold inside state security structures and a veterans' and recruiting network unavailable to an ordinary street movement.
- Amnesty International documented abductions, unlawful detention, robbery, and extortion by Aidar in September 2014, together with indications of possible executions.
- The United States later restricted assistance to Azov through congressional appropriations provisions. In June 2024 the State Department announced that the 12th Special Forces Brigade Azov had passed Leahy vetting.

The structural claim is a bargain, not a hidden master plan. A state under military pressure absorbed armed formations it did not fully control, while the memory apparatus supplied an increasingly legitimate national vocabulary for historical symbols that parts of those formations already used.

By Ilovaisk in August 2014 and Debaltseve in February 2015, Russian regular forces were also part of the opposing force. That fact is compatible with the argument here and should be stated plainly: the reality of Russian military intervention does not erase the independent history of the organizations Ukraine chose to incorporate.

9. Mainstreaming

The electoral far right is weak. KUN holds no seats in the 450-member Verkhovna Rada. In the 2019 parliamentary election, the united nationalist list led by Svoboda and joined by National Corps and Right Sector won roughly 2.15 percent of the vote.

That is often treated as the end of the discussion. It is not. Electoral power and historical normalization are different things. A symbol can become mainstream precisely because the state and civic institutions have detached it from the electoral fortunes of the party that once owned it.

The Ukrainian School of Political Studies is useful because it is not a fringe organization. Founded in 2005 in connection with Ukraine's Council of Europe trajectory, it trains and networks politicians, administrators, journalists, and civic leaders. At its annual community meeting in December 2025, participants posed before an institutional backdrop holding a horizontal red-over-black banner.

Figure 1. Ukrainian School of Political Studies annual community meeting, December 2025. Participants pose before a USHPS-branded backdrop while holding a horizontal red-over-black banner. Photograph supplied by the author.

The photograph cannot establish what every person pictured believes. It does establish something more basic and more useful: the banner could appear in a mainstream civic-education setting without functioning as an obvious marker of political extremism. That is what normalization looks like.

The benign interpretation is symbolic decoupling: many Ukrainians now read the banner simply as resistance to Russian invasion. But symbolic decoupling is not the opposite of memory policy. It can be its result. A symbol becomes ordinary when enough of its history has been displaced, recoded, or subordinated to a newer civic meaning.

10. Washington: Access and Labels

The influence apparatus

Ukraine's lobbying activity in the United States is documented through Foreign Agents Registration Act filings. Quincy Institute analysis reported more than 13,500 political activities by registrants working for Ukrainian interests in 2021, before the full-scale Russian invasion. The Saudi lobby reported 2,834 contacts in the same comparison, while firms representing Japanese clients reported 3,209. More than 91 percent of the pro-Ukraine total came from Yorktown Solutions. After the invasion, Yorktown reported 8,296 political activities for the Federation of Employers of the Oil and Gas Industry alone.

Those figures establish scale. They do not need to be inflated into a claim that every lobbying contact concerned OUN-UPA history. The documented subject matter centers on sanctions, energy, aid, and related policy. The significance for this paper is institutional: a state whose historical memory politics are contested also possesses an unusually dense advocacy infrastructure in the capital of its principal sponsor.

The labeling apparatus

A different mechanism operates through the Ukrainian state itself. The Center for Countering Disinformation, established in 2021 under the President and within the National Security and Defense Council, publicly identified foreign politicians, academics, and journalists as promoters of Russian propaganda in July 2022. Named Americans included Senator Rand Paul, Tulsi Gabbard, John Mearsheimer, Edward Luttwak, Douglas Macgregor, and Glenn Greenwald.

The Center is not Yorktown and should not be collapsed into the lobbying apparatus. One buys access; the other assigns labels. But taken together they show two distinct instruments through which a client state can shape the informational

environment around itself: advocacy inside the sponsor's institutions and official classification of inconvenient arguments as enemy narratives.

11. Conclusion: The Roads Were Already There

The claim that OUN-B extremism belongs safely to a short wartime "heyday" cannot survive the chronology. The political method begins before the German occupation: the OUN was founded in 1929, called for an ethnically homogeneous state, and used assassination. OUN-B emerged from that organization in 1940 as its militant Bandera faction. The wartime record added collaboration, pogrom participation, authoritarian state-building, and mass ethnic violence. Defeat did not dissolve the organization.

After 1945, Bandera built a Foreign Section around ideological discipline and personal authority. U.S. counterintelligence documented intimidation and terror against rival Ukrainians. By 1951, the CIA knew that at least twenty former or active members of the OUN-B security service were in the United States and explicitly decided that dismantling the structure was not necessarily in American interests. In 1977, the CIA still described OUN-B as an active transnational organization and a decisive force in the Anti-Bolshevik Bloc of Nations.

A rival line of former OUN-B leaders then created another bridge. Mykola Lebed moved to New York. The CIA financed a publishing and influence operation around Prolog and the foreign representation of the Supreme Ukrainian Liberation Council. When the Justice Department later investigated Lebed, the CIA protected the relationship and tried, as late as 1991, to prevent investigators from seeking foreign OUN wartime records. At almost the same moment, the Bandera organizational lineage was returning to an independent Ukraine.

That sequence changes the meaning of modern memory politics. The state did not reach backward to rescue a movement that had vanished in 1945. It inherited a tradition whose organizations and personnel had spent half a century surviving through exile, intelligence sponsorship, diaspora institutions, publishing networks, and transnational anti-communist politics. By the time the red-and-black banner could be held casually in a mainstream civic photograph, the road from interwar underground to wartime movement to Cold War emigration to independent Ukraine had already been traveled many times.

The roads were already there. What changed was who controlled the map.

Documentary Sources and Selected Scholarship

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14. Amnesty International, reporting on abuses attributed to the Aidar battalion, September 2014.

15. Foreign Agents Registration Act eFile records, OpenSecrets Foreign Lobby Watch, and Quincy Institute for Responsible Statecraft analysis of Ukrainian lobbying activity.

16. Ukrainian School of Political Studies institutional material and the author's image archive for the December 2025 annual community meeting.